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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2020/02/24
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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT YAR'ADUA RETURNS TO NIGERIA: WHAT NEXT?

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Abuja, Political Section; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's secretive return to Abuja at roughly 0230 February 24 created new uncertainty over who has actual charge of Nigerian Government (GON) decision-making, and raised new concerns about a military intervention. The absence of any images of Yar'Adua's return compounds the mystery. The February 9 non-binding resolutions designating Vice President Jonathan as Acting President stipulated that he would retain that capacity until Yar'Adua submitted a written declaration to the Senate President and House Speaker that he was fit for duty. An embarrassed six-person Cabinet team returned from Saudi Arabia mid-morning February 24. Although today's weekly Wednesday Cabinet (Federal Executive Council -- FEC) meeting was cancelled, Jonathan summoned ministers for a 1400 meeting, of which we are seeking details. The Cabinet is apparently still divided along regional lines. See paragraph 2 for key questions or triggers that Mission will be watching over the next few days to identify the center of gravity of power and whether it pulls toward Yar'Adua, Jonathan, the military, or a Northern group. This is an inter-agency telegram. END SUMMARY.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS/TRIGGERS AND ANSWERS

¶2. (S/NF) To sort through the complex and evolving situation, Mission Nigeria includes the following questions, and possible answers, regarding the current situation:

- Q. How do we expect Acting President Jonathan to react to Yar'Adua's return?

- A. Although Jonathan has exhibited some authority in the past couple of weeks, we view Jonathan as conservative, cautious, and probably unwilling to make a principled stand against Yar'Adua's cronies. The postponement of the February 24 FEC meeting, for example, may have benefited Yar'Adua's supporters who dread a decision on the President's health, but it also gave Jonathan an excuse to avoid the awkward choice of sitting in the Chairperson's seat or returning to his former place as Vice President. Mission expects Jonathan to assume a lower profile in the next few days, angling behind-the-scenes for strong statements from elder statesmen, senior officials, and foreign partners to shore up his position but not doing anything brash. If challenged to hand back power to Yar'Adua, Mission suspects that he may request to see the President first and verify whether the National Assembly and the Cabinet concur with any decision to restore Yar'Adua.

- Q. What does the "Katsina clique" seek to gain from bringing back President Yar'Adua?

- A. The small group surrounding Yar'Adua appears focused on maintaining their grip on power for as long as possible, and probably view Yar'Adua's return to Nigeria as the only means to stave off an immediate declaration of permanent incapacitation from

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the Cabinet. The clique probably has limited expectations that they can withstand pressure to relinquish power forever, but they clearly believe that they can sustain their charade for a few more days or weeks. Hoping beyond hope, the group seems to believe that they can issue edicts from the Villa, continue to line their pockets from the government coffers, and remove ministers and officials they deem disloyal, while maintaining a possibly unwilling Yar'Adua "under lock and key."

- Q. What is Yar'Adua's current capacity to govern?

- A. Previous reporting suggests that President Yar'Adua is both physically and cognitively incapable of running Nigeria. He may have a limited ability to gesture or briefly communicate with family and medical staff, but this is not sufficient to resume responsibilities as head of state.

- Q. Where is the military?

- A. Thus far, the military remains on the sidelines, with senior leaders publicly and privately counseling more junior officers and troops to avoid any involvement in political affairs, except if absolutely necessary to restore order. Mission has detected no unusual movements but cannot completely rule out the possibility of a coup, especially if the political vacuum continues for another week or more.

- Q. What role will the Federal Executive Council and/or the National Assembly assume in the coming days?

- A. Probably even more so than either Acting President Jonathan or Yar'Adua's supporters, the Cabinet and National Assembly are likely to emerge as the principal actors in resolving the crisis. Their

actions will either bolster Jonathan and force the "Katsina clique" to show their cards, or they will give the Yar'Adua camp the green light to continue the farce and resume control. Judging from their past record, we would expect the National Assembly, particularly the Senate, to give little weight to assertions that Yar'Adua remains ready to reclaim executive power without first-hand evidence. Moreover, both the Constitution and the National Assembly's February 9 resolution require the Presidential Villa to transmit a letter to the leaders of the national legislature saying Yar'Adua is fit to rule again before they withdraw Jonathan's Acting President privileges.

- The Cabinet, with its divisions and cast of lackluster ministers, probably remains more open to persuasion than the legislature. FEC members are keenly aware that their jobs are "on the line" -- depending upon which camp they side with and which camp emerges victorious. Mission, nonetheless, judges FEC members as unlikely to bless Yar'Adua's resumption of power sight unseen either.

COMMENT

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13. (S) The timing of Yar'Adua's return took most of Nigeria's political elite by surprise, despite the existence for some time of rumors and government statements that he would soon return. Acting President Jonathan adjusted his schedule, including a planned February 24 nighttime meeting with the Ambassador, after learning of Yar'Adua's impending return. The visit by the ministerial delegation may have forced the hand of the President's "Katsina clique," who apparently wanted to avoid the embarrassment of having to turn aside a visit by an official delegation established by, and comprised of, his own ministers.

14. (S) The motive for Yar'Adua's return remains unclear. Members of his inner circle may have wanted Yar'Adua to return to Nigeria to pass his final days, or they may have decided that their hold on to power would be more likely if they attempted to rule the country through proxies from the President's residence in Abuja. In any case, his return throws greater uncertainty on the current political situation, with power divided between a seriously-ill President and a recently-designated Acting President. Until now, the military has stayed on the sidelines. We will continue to monitor the situation for any unusual movements. The next week, particularly the next 24 to 48 hours, will remain critical for the future of Nigeria's democracy and civilian rule. Yar'Adua's return introduces some doubt over who is in charge of the government's affairs. Some will demand a written declaration, as stipulated by the National Assembly's resolutions, plus some evidence of life and lucidity. Others may insist that Yar'Adua's mere return makes him President again without the need for any additional formality. We are in for several confusing days ahead and we will be looking for evidence of all of the above as Nigerians watch in disbelief the bizarre behavior of their putative leaders. END COMMENT.

SANDERS